

Avant Garde Festival

The underwater cellist: 'Push her further down!'

by Annette Kuhn

"When is Charlotte gonna do it?"

"What is she gonna do?"

"Play a cello under water."

"Oh sure."

And she did.

Charlotte Moorman, impresario for the avant-garde, has gotten together another of her annual anarchic spectacles, this time with aquatic undertones. The Alexander Hamilton, a five-level sightseeing boat moored at the South Street Seaport Museum, was the locale for this year's taste of avant-garde. I didn't find it so avant, but who cares. It was fun, as always. Here's how.

The fishy foul smell of the East River rose up as the rains came down Saturday afternoon on the Alexander Hamilton. Brayings, bleepings, and buzzes fill the ship. Events are setting up, doing over, driving out, and pulling in the many spectators who come despite the wet. More than 90 separate artists or groups are participating. There is no way to tell it like it really was, or seemed to be:

The purser's office of the ship, free standing in the middle of a deck, the ticket windows open. Inside, a batch of tellers, turn-of-the-century clothes, green eye

shades, piles of forms to be filled out, perform the elaborate and time-killing movements of bureaucracacy. The careful five-minute hunt for a rubber band. The painful, exact procedure for filling out a form. We stand outside, looking in through the window grills. No slip out of role, not a smile at themselves. Bureaucratic self-absorption has become another ritual to be canonized by performance.

A turn-of-the-century couple sit on steamer trunks outside a ticket window. "Excuse me, but if I wanted to give your troupe a name, what would it be?" The woman clutches her parrot cage tighter and looks away. The time machine effect works momentarily. I am embarrassed.

Somewhere else on the ship is a cabin full of leaves piled knee-high. Children wallow in it. Nice. Or, many video screens lying on their back under a plexiglass top. Children lie on it, peering down like through a glass bottom boat. But they see video life down there, not marine life.

Further, a videotape of a 77-year-old hardware dealer, another tape of his store and stock. He talks about the lost virtues of an older America like only a man who helped them get lost can—with prejudice and passion. The

whole thing is a new journalism story on tape. Find a bigot, describe him and his wretched surroundings. Let him talk himself into a ridiculous hole, sit back and smile. Liberal voyeurism, but a good piece, because it has to do with reporting news with that "understanding" slant.

But except for that, there is too much video stuff everywhere. It's just not interesting. One tape playing on several machines had a Tina Turner performance running. The area was jammed, the music good, the Turner struttings were appreciated. But who wants to see Tina Turner on video in a place like this? It's nice that the video people got it all down, but home movie is home movie and it's an imposition on me. I don't like home movies.

Elsewhere, at a lunch counter a tuna sandwich and glass of milk are given out every hour. A man sits down with his hourly lunch. Many people take his picture. He eats away. The cameras begin to find each other more interesting. Everybody ends up shooting everybody else. Lens to lens.

The great event comes. Charlotte and her cello. There is a big tank of water, the super aquarium. Charlotte is in a day-glo diving suit, perching on the tank rim. Booker Washington, consultant, diver for International Underwater Contractors, fiddles and juggles the diving mask around. Charlotte's hair keeps getting into the exhale exhaust.

Finally Charlotte plunges into the tank, as the displaced water lunges over Booker Washington and all of us. The cello follows Charlotte in. More water comes

out. The photographers yell, "Push her down, push her further down," so they can get good shots of her and her cello all submerged in the tank. Booker Washington plays his hand on her helmet and pushes. She's down, perfectly centered in the tank, plunking the cello guts with fingers and tapping with the bow. Five minutes later it's all over. Charlotte has played her cello in another impossible place.

A South Street Seaport Museum official takes a swig from his beer can and wipes the sweat from his forehead.

It's a sad moment. Ken Dewey and Tiger Morse, people important for their talent and imagination, are both dead and missed. The Brooklyn Bridge and downtown skyscrapers are shrouded in fog. An autumnal event.

What will Charlotte do for next year's festival?